

# Climb the Darn Mountain!

By Denny Emerson



**ABOVE:** Jack Baker on Scout, Paul Barrett on Chief, and Denny Emerson on Paint, taken at the Stoneleigh-Prospect Hill School in Greenfield, Massachusetts in the mid-1950s.

I saw a Facebook meme that said “You aren’t going to remember mowing your lawn. Go climb the darn mountain.” For Morgan horse people this could translate to, “Go ride under a full moon!”

The word “adventure” implies the opposite of routine—something memorable, perhaps with a hint of risk, the concept expressed by the saying “Everything you ever wanted is on the other side of fear.” You can take the same Morgan that you ride or drive one way and tinker that around to create something vivid and new, something you’ll remember long after that ribbon on the tack room wall has faded.

Here are four adventures that I’ve had: camping out overnight with my horse, riding at night, galloping on a beach, and herding cattle.

My camping out overnight adventure did not end as well as anticipated. In 1953 or ’54, Jack Baker, Paul Barrett, and I rode our ponies (Scout, Chief, and Paint) through the woods from the campus of Stoneleigh-Prospect Hill School in Greenfield, Massachusetts, to a meadow where earlier we’d built a circle of stones for a campfire. We unsaddled and tied Paint, Scout, and Chief to three birch trees, lit the fire, and cooked some s’mores. It was a warm, long summer evening and we slept under the stars using our saddles for pillows the way we’d seen real cowboys do in the movies. In the morning, when we woke up the three birch trees were still there but not one of them had a pony tied to it. We tramped a couple of miles back to the school barn and there they were, happily munching grass.

My nighttime ride on Lippitt Raymond, by contrast, was pure pleasure, although it happened more by accident than by design. I’d gone far afield from my parents’ farm in South Reading, Vermont, one July evening, out onto a remote section of the Brown

Schoolhouse Road, when dusk descended into night. I wasn’t lost, but neither did I know where I was, so I did what they tell you to do, give your horse his head. The little brown Morgan stallion walked confidently along the tree-darkened back roads. It was a quiet night, no moon, few stars. The only sounds were the squeak of saddle leather and the soft clopping of hooves on dirt. After about an hour, Lippitt Raymond stopped. I nudged him with my foot and Ray took a step and stopped again. I got off carefully, arms wide and sweeping, and touched the granite hitching post in front of our barn. Horses *do* know the way home.

Galloping on the beach at low tide on the firm sand down by the waterline is as exciting to do as it is to visualize. I’ve done it only once, on my good event horse named Victor Dakin, as part of a United States Equestrian Team fitness outing. The USET headquarters in 1976 were in South Hamilton, Massachusetts, and Cranes Beach in nearby Ipswich allowed horses during the winter and early spring, before the summer tourist onslaught. We trucked the horses in the big team van and trotted north along the shoreline for a couple of miles to check for bottles, planks with nails, or other hazards, and then in pairs we galloped at medium pace back the way we’d come. The horses tugged to go faster, and Victor leapt sideways to escape the attacking waves. I wasn’t riding bareback with my arms flung wide, but it was as close as I have come to an Alec Ramsay and *The Black Stallion* moment.

For a real cattle drive I had to fly from Vermont to Montana, where my friends Tom and Jesse Alderson had a ranch on the actual Rosebud battlefield. I’d heard the word “roundup,” but Tom had been invited to a “bull gather” down in Decker, Montana, and



ADVENTURERS ON MORGANS

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Colonel John Hutcheson on one of his epic backpacking trips into the mountains; Victoria Walz on the beach with Sarde's Sinful (photo © Lila Tatar); Kathleen Bailey and Antonio Steffon skijoring with Kennebec Echo (photo © Jamie Lawler); Sleigh driving at Burkland Farm (photo © Andy Illes).

he let me ride his thoroughbred event mare, Mimi, in a Western saddle. Six hundred black bulls were scattered over a vast enclosure of several thousand acres, and they were to be gathered up and taken from summer range to winter pasture. We fanned out, herding smaller groups into increasingly bigger ones. It was rough, hard riding, steep declines, heavily wooded trails, abrupt drop offs, the type of terrain that I'd seen in John Wayne movies.

The riders who grew up in those conditions take it as it comes, no big deal, but I found it daunting. I was riding along a trail that had a vertical ledge above me to my left, and a close to vertical shale slide below me to my right, and the trail got more and more narrow. Mimi came to a halt where the little thread of trail had been shorn off the mountain side for a few feet. A cat could get across it, but not a horse.

I could see Tom and a couple of other riders off to my right, and I yelled across, "Hey, Tom, how do I get over to where you are?" I figured he'd say, "Turn around and backtrack," or something like that, but he yelled back, "Let go of her head and kick her."

I was faced with a predicament—be revealed as an Eastern

chicken in front of real cowboys, or die. Some things are worse than death. I let go of the reins and kicked her. Mimi sort of hunched down, made a leap, her front hooves caught the trail where it widened, and she scrambled to safety.

Later, I asked, "Hey, Tom, don't they sometimes fall when they do that?"

"Oh, sure," he replied.

"So what happens if they fall?" I asked.

"They somersault to the bottom," Tom said.

"So what do you do if they somersault to the bottom?" I asked.

"Step off the uphill side," came the answer.

Maybe don't go with my friend Tom on your first cattle drive.

So, these are my four adventures. There are hundreds more, which brings us back to the initial question, mow the lawn or climb the darn mountain? Whatever decision you make, you can bet your Morgan will be game and ready to take you just as far as you are ready to go. ■